

"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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The Larger Parish and Rural Reconstruction Unit

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Frequent requests have been made for an exact and authoritative definition of the Larger Parish, but it must be frankly admitted that no such definition has been formulated, and for a very good reason. The Larger Parish is a theory and philosophy of rural religious work, rather than a standardized plan or procedure everywhere the same. Its real genius and purpose are: first, a ministry over areas as well as churches, and second, a major emphasis upon populations instead of 'constituencies.' It embodies a ministry to all of the people who live upon a definite area of inhabited land.

The practice of the Larger Parish is not altogether new. Aggressive ministers have used the plan more or less for many years without bothering to give it a name. It possesses many of the elements of the old circuit rider system, brought up to date and given a new emphasis and larger scope. The minister who uses the Larger Parish plan feels not only obligated to render faithful service to his own particular church and people, but also swayed by an absorbing passion to minister over large areas. He has the vision of the foreign missionary who does not feel himself called to a church or parish, but who proposes to occupy great stretches of countryside in the name of the Most High. The limits of parish and community will always transcend the narrow confines of village or town to reach out in every direction and include all of the homes and peoples whose interests center there. The Larger Parish recognizes that 'the village church will fail that does not buttress itself up with a strong country work.' Feeders are therefore established by means of preaching stations, Sunday schools, and social and other activities. But churches themselves are not the chief end of effort. The measure of 'success' is an ability on the part of a minister to lead his people out with himself into a program of genuine service to the countryside. The leader of a Larger Parish has no time to speculate about the 'killing range' of centers, for he is too busy exalting a 'serving range' which will minister to overlooked people in the nearby country.

A Religious-Cooperative

The Larger Parish is convinced that churches can no longer preach and practice competition when cooperation exists in almost every other activity of rural life. It therefore seeks to combine a number of rural

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churches of a 'sociological area' into a sort of religious cooperative which utilizes social, economic and religious activities. Town and country are made conscious of their inter-dependence. Neighborhoods, churches and peoples are induced to pool their resources so that together they can obtain a program, equipment and ministry which no one of them has ever been able to get alone. People of different kinds, creeds and communions organize themselves into an effort which subordinates doctrinal tests to those of Christian discipleship. The Larger Parish is a real practice of democracy in religion. For ministers, churches and peoples acting together formulate and administer plans and programs by means of a Larger Parish Council made up of delegates officially elected by the cooperating units. Effort is made to underwrite a multiple ministry of trained specialists with departmental responsibilities and also to discover, mobilize, train and use volunteer local leadership.

It is quite evident that the Larger Parish is more than a 'yoked field' or a 'glorified circuit' of preaching appointments. These are seldom more than methods of supplementing the salaries of ministers. The services rendered are those of a 'vocal ministry' like that of the old circuit rider, and no real program of combined and cooperative effort is made and used. The Larger Parish consistently welds together a number of rural churches and their peoples of a definitely determined area into a consciously accepted team-play. The parish is a geographical and population unity where each individual, home and locality is to receive exactly the same pastoral care and religious oversight. Sectarian interests give way before a cooperative program which really puts first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness.

A Religio-Social Program

Dr. Butterfield's Rural Reconstruction Unit puts religion at the center. But churches are to be community churches in the sense of actually serving or seeking to serve all elements within the parish area in certain aspects of community life. Religious institutions are also to cooperate with secular agencies in a combination program for the total good. To this end the Larger Parish utilizes a religio-social program which functions seven days of the week and takes into account the whole man and the entire life process. Modern equipments are sought for ideal worship, religious education and recreational activities. Where these activities are promoted at centers, they belong equally to the people of the countryside, and an extension service carries many of them to people who live at the farthest circumference of the parish. The religio-social program thus amounts to the church plus the Y.M.C.A., Y.W.C.A. and other service agencies with their programs adapted to rural life and country peoples. Churches become social as well as religious centers. There is a fundamental interest in saving souls, and also a like passion for saving people themselves and their environments. The religio-social program tries to avoid duplicating the efforts and activities of institutions and agencies which do certain things far better than churches can or should. It also cooperates with their programs and seeks to supplement and use them. The Larger Parish considers it a triumph when it has demonstrated the usefulness of activities to such an extent that communities incorporate them as items in their own permanent programs.

Conservation of Populations

The Larger Parish works at the heart of an important phase of the 'rural problem.' It helps to preserve a sufficient population on the soil with an emphasis upon quality even more than on quantity. It does this by making country life attractive and more self-sufficing along hitherto neglected lines. The trend to the cities is largely caused by the lure of attractions and privileges which exist only in urban centers. When attempts are made to bring them to the countryside, they are generally the poorest of the poor--promoted by commercialized agencies for revenue only. The country church has been guilty of unpardonable neglect at this point, doing little more than thunder against 'questionable amusements' without attempting to provide the right kind. It has done this to an extent which has alienated youth and brought forth the general complaint that 'the parson and his church are dead set against anything and everything I most want to do.' The Larger Parish and the Rural Reconstruction Unit are interested in bringing to the country, under right selection and supervision, those privileges which are drawing rural people to the cities. But their aim is to build up the country after its own pattern, rather than to ape urban life. Thus rural religion and the country churches become strong agencies for making rural life attractive so as to hold a right proportion of boys and girls in the country, making them willing to stay on the farm.

But there is another side of the duty to be performed. The country has always possessed a surplus of children and youth. It feeds, clothes and educates them up to their late teens. But a large number of these young people are not meant to remain in the country, and must be fitted to go to the cities, especially in ways of religion and character. The Larger Parish perceives its rare opportunity of working at the source and fountain head of that tide of young life which has flowed cityward from time immemorial. It also senses a grave responsibility. If it fails to indoctrinate youth with an unalterable belief in the Bible, religion and the church while in the country, the city church and other forms of organized righteousness are not likely to reach them later on. The problem of conserving the integrity of rural young people is a matter of vital concern to the city. It is not an idle sentiment which declares that country youth must be saved to save America.

A Gospel of the Soil

Recent emphasis in the Larger Parish plan is the Gospel of the Soil. Dr. Butterfield and his Rural Reconstruction Unit were profoundly interested in this achievement since it has to do with making country people prosperous as well as happy. Rural religion and the country church have only to catch step with a new farmer who is even now in the making. He is the husbandman whom someone has described as a farmer who is 'married to the soil.' He treats the soil with much of the consideration and affection shown toward his own wife and family, for his unit of interest and value is land itself, and after that, the whole farmer class that works thereon. The husbandman comes to believe that while he may hold a legal title to his farm, he does

not really own it, for 'the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof,' and all land is 'holy earth.' The husbandman feels himself bound to think of generations yet unborn who must live on the land after he has done with it. Farming is a partnership and even co-creatorship with God. It is also a partnership between man and the soil, to the end of making the earth yield her full increase for the good of all. A first need voiced by the Creator after he had made the earth and all other animate things was for the farmer. Here emerges the real dignity and place of all those who work on the land. The farmer must be a cooperator, for without his assistance, the ground would not only refuse to yield its full increase, it would also revert to type. It would lapse back again into primeval chaos, since such is Nature's way when left to her own unaided devices. Man's primary responsibility is to care for the earth. He must 'dress it'--plow, harrow, sow, cultivate and harvest; he must also keep it--guarding it against pests, erosions, ravages of wind or flood, disasters of heat and cold and from wicked abuses by man.

The Larger Parish stays close to the soil for it reverences the God-made integrities of the earth and country life far more than it does the man-made artificialities of the city. It therefore wishes to sit at the feet of the farmer who understands and uses the Gospel of the Soil in his business of farming. It would enlist him above all others in a leadership which will enrol rural religion and the country church as members of the Divine cooperative. For the Larger Parish must be of God, of man, and of the soil.

Author's Note: I was asked to write a few words appreciative of the late Dr. Kenyon L. Butterfield and to give some explanation of his Rural Reconstruction Unit. The first requirement imposes an easy and welcome task, for one of my most treasured memories will always be an intimate acquaintance with Dr. Butterfield. He gave me my first interest in rural work, and if seventeen years of devotion to that cause have accomplished anything, it has been in large measure due to the constant inspiration imparted by that true prophet of the rural order. Dr. Butterfield was the finest example of a Christian gentleman that I have ever known.

The second requirement was not so easy to satisfy for Dr. Butterfield had only just begun to formulate clear and definite ideas of the Rural Reconstruction Unit when he died. He had only a short time before become the president of the New England Town and Country Commission, and it was in the nature of tragedy that he had to be taken from a work so auspiciously begun. Dr. Butterfield, however, was always a warm advocate of the Larger Parish and included it in his ideas of the Rural Reconstruction Unit. The latter gave to the Larger Parish a more definite community basis and objective. It seemed best, therefore, to give some description of the philosophy and program of the Larger Parish which played so large a part in the conception of a Rural Reconstruction Unit.